“A Child Weaned on Poison”

Stereotypes of Violent Women in the Novels of Gillian Flynn

Jenni Lindroos

Master’s Thesis

Master’s Programme in English Studies

Faculty of Arts

University of Helsinki

April 2021

Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty
Humanistinen / Kielten osasto

Tekijä – Författare – Author
Jenni Lindroos

Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title
”A Child Weaned on Poison”: Stereotypes of Violent Women in the Novels of Gillian Flynn

Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject
Englantilainen filologia

Työn laji – Arbetets	Aika – Datum – Month and year	Sivumäärä – Sidoantal – Number of pages
Pro gradu -tutkielma	Huhtikuu 2021	43

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tutkielma käsittelee Gillian Flynnin romaaneja *Teräviä esineitä* (*Sharp Objects*, 2006), *Paha paikka* (*Dark Places*, 2009) ja *Kiltti tyttö* (*Gone Girl*, 2012). Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan romaanien naishahmoja ja heidän käyttämäänsä väkivaltaa ja pyritään selvittämään, miten nämä hahmot vastaavat yleisiä stereotyyppejä väkivaltaisista naisista. Teoreettisena lähtökohtana käytetään feminististä kriminologiaa, erityisesti tutkimuksia narratiiveista, joita yleisesti käytetään kuvailtaessa rikollisia naisia ja selitettäessä heidän väkivaltaisuuttaan. Näistä narratiiveista tutkielmassa keskitytään kolmeen, joissa väkivaltaiset naiset käsitetään joko hulluiksi, pahoiksi tai uhreiksi.

Tutkielmassa käsiteltävät henkilöhahmot jaetaan kahteen väkivaltaisen naisen arkkityyppiin, joita käsitellään erikseen kuhunkin liittyvien stereotypioiden kautta. Näistä ensimmäinen on väkivaltaiset teinitytöt. Tutkielmassa esitän, että Flynnin tyttöhahmot ovat tietoisia modernin yhteiskunnan teinityttöihin kohdistamista käsityksistä ja odotuksista ja osaavat käyttää niitä hyödykseen oman väkivaltansa salaamiseksi. Lisäksi kartoitan seksuaalisuuden ja väkivallan yhtymäkohtia, jotka koskevat romaaneissa nimenomaan teinityttöjä ja jotka liittyvät erityisesti yhteiskunnalliseen ”paha”-narratiiviin.

Toinen tutkielmassa analysoitava arkkityyppi on väkivaltainen äiti. Flynnin romaanien äitihahmot satuttavat sekä omia lapsiaan että muita, ja heidän motiivinsa vastaavat selkeämmin olemassa olevia stereotyyppejä, erityisesti ”hullu”- ja ”paha”-selityksiä. Yhdistän äitihahmojen väkivallan myös heidän tytärtensä ja omien äitiensä väkivaltaisuuteen ja siten myös ”uhri”-narratiiviin, joka liittyy olennaisesti kysymyksiin väkivallan periytyvyydestä.

Tutkielmassa todetaan, että Flynnin nais- ja tyttöhahmot osaltaan sekä rikkovat että vahvistavat stereotyyppejä naiseudesta ja väkivallasta. Naisten rooli romaanien pääasiallisina väkivallan tekijöinä kyseenalaistaa jo itsessään perinteisiä sukupuolirooleja, mutta osa hahmoista päätyy edustamaan stereotyyppisiä käsityksiä naisten väkivallasta. Toisaalta osa hahmoista, etenkin Amy romaanissa *Kiltti tyttö*, vastustaa tällaista yksinkertaista lukemista, mikä voidaan nähdä osoituksena Flynnin kritiikistä fiktion ja muun median stereotyyppisiä naiskuvia kohtaan.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
Gillian Flynn, väkivalta, stereotyypit, feminismi

Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited
Helsingin yliopiston digitaalinen arkisto HELDA (E-thesis)

Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

> "Libraries are filled with stories on generations of brutal men, trapped in a cycle of aggression. I wanted to write about the violence of women." (Flynn 2015, n.p.)

In her 2015 essay "I Was Not a Nice Little Girl…" Gillian Flynn identifies a notable lack of female violence in literature and popular culture in general and goes on to state her mission to write about "violent, wicked" and "[s]cary women" (ibid.). In her essay, she focuses specifically on her first novel, *Sharp Objects*, but her ongoing mission is just as apparent in her other two novels, *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*. All three are thrillers focused on solving a specific murder, but what most notably connects the novels are the violent, aggressive and otherwise deviant female characters. "There are no good women in *Sharp Objects*," Flynn claims (ibid.), and the same can be said of her other two novels. Most, if not all, of Flynn's female characters consistently act in ways that fall outside their traditional societal roles as white, mostly (upper) middle class women and girls; as such, they are not "good women" in the traditional sense. In this thesis, I will analyze the most central female characters in Flynn's three novels, focusing on their violent behavior and how the portrayal of that violence relates to stereotypical perceptions of women in general and violent women specifically. I will identify two major archetypes of violent women – the violent teenage girl and the violent mother – and analyze the role that these archetypes play and the way in which they are represented in each of the novels. I will argue that Flynn's portrayals of female violence both break overarching societal expectations for women and comply with conventionalized explanations for women's violence.

1.1 About the Novels

Sharp Objects, Flynn's first novel, was first published in 2006. The story is narrated by the main character, Camille Preaker, a Chicago journalist who gets sent back to her old hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri to investigate and report on two recent child murders. While in Wind Gap, she stays at her childhood home with her mother Adora, stepfather Alan and thirteen-year-old half-sister Amma. She begins looking into the murders of two girls, nine-year-old Ann Nash and ten-year-old Natalie Keene, who have both been strangled and had their teeth removed. As her investigation progresses, Camille gets to know Amma, the queen bee of the town, and becomes reacquainted with Adora, to whom she has not spoken much since moving to Chicago. What begins as uncomfortable tension between each of these three characters soon starts

revealing more and more violent undertones. Camille witnesses Amma take pleasure in both seeing and inflicting violence and begins to wonder whether there is something more sinister to Amma than she lets on. Around the same time, Camille becomes concerned when the way Adora treats Amma's frequent illnesses reminds Camille of the way Adora used to treat Camille's sister Marian before her death of an apparently naturally occurring illness. Camille also notes Adora's relationship with both of the murdered girls before their deaths. She goes to see Marian's old medical records to confirm her suspicions and finds out that Adora most likely has Munchausen by Proxy, a condition that causes her to intentionally make her children ill so that she can treat them, and thus most likely killed Marian and is doing the same to Amma. This leads Camille to conclude that Adora killed the two girls, too. When she then attempts to confront Adora about this, Adora proceeds to poison both Amma and Camille, but they are saved in time by the police, whom Camille had managed to alert. Adora is arrested for the murders, and Camille ends up taking Amma back to Chicago with her. A few weeks after their return, however, a friend of Amma's from her new school dies in a similar fashion to Ann and Natalie – strangled and her teeth pulled out. After hearing this, Camille goes into Amma's room and finds that the floor in one of the rooms in Amma's precious dollhouse, a replica of Adora's house in Wind Gap, is made of human teeth. With this, Camille finally realizes that while Adora was responsible for Marian's death, it was Amma with her three friends that killed Ann and Natalie.

Flynn's second novel, *Dark Places* (originally 2009) is told from the points of view of three characters along two different timelines. The first takes place in the present day, and tells the story of Libby Day, the sole survivor of the Day Massacre, where her fifteen-year-old brother Ben killed their mother and their two sisters, Debby and Michelle. For the past 24 years, Libby has been living by selling her story to the press, but she is now rapidly running out of money and as a result agrees to go talk to a true crime fan group about her experience. The members of the group are convinced that Ben is actually innocent and was wrongly imprisoned. Libby does not want to believe this because it was her testimony at eight years old that got Ben convicted in the first place, but her lack of money forces her to start investigating the case again with the help of the group. The other timeline, then, takes place during January 2, 1985 – the day of the massacre – and it alternates between the points of view of Patty Day, the single mother of Libby, Ben, Debby and Michelle, and Ben, fifteen years old at the time. During that day, Patty finds out that the family's farm is going under, meaning that she will not be able to provide for her family and will likely be shunned by the surrounding farming community. On top of this, she is worried about recent changes in Ben's behavior: he has just dyed his hair

black and started becoming more distant from his family. Shortly after finding out about the fate of the farm, Patty hears that a ten-year-old girl has accused Ben of molesting her. Meanwhile that same day, Ben goes over to his girlfriend Diondra's house. Diondra, two years older than Ben, is pregnant with his child, which is a problem because of Diondra's extremely strict father. Ben, Diondra and her cousin Trey spend the day going around town and getting high, though Ben is only along reluctantly and at Diondra's insistence. Their night culminates in a ritual-like killing of a cow, after which Diondra decides that she and Ben have to leave town before her father finds out about the pregnancy. Thus, they end up at the Day farm to pick up Ben's things, planning to leave that night, but that plan is thwarted when Michelle sees them and threatens to tell people about Diondra's pregnancy. As a result, Diondra strangles Michelle to death and tries to command Ben to kill Libby, too, but Ben secretly lets Libby go. On that same night, unbeknownst to everyone, Patty has arranged a hitman to come to the farm and kill her so that her children could get the money from her life insurance. In the inevitable chaos of that night, the hitman ends up killing not only Patty, but also Debby, before fleeing the scene. In the present day, Libby finds out the truth of the events of that night when she goes to visit Diondra and her now-adult daughter Crystal. After Crystal accidentally lets slip a revealing detail, they attempt to kill Libby, but she manages to escape. In the end, Diondra is arrested for the murder of Michelle, and Ben, now proven innocent, is released from prison.

Flynn's third and, as of the writing of this thesis, latest novel, *Gone Girl* (2012), is also told from two perspectives. The first half alternates between Nick Dunne and the diary entries of Amy Elliot Dunne, Nick's wife. The novel begins when Nick comes home to find that his wife is missing with signs of a struggle in the house. He calls the police, and because of the evidence of violence at the house, an investigation is immediately opened. Amy's parents, wealthy children's authors, begin a widespread media campaign to find Amy and bring her home. Soon, however, the evidence starts pointing towards Nick, who nevertheless professes his innocence. At the same time, in Amy's diary entries from the years between their first meeting up until her disappearance, Nick begins to appear increasingly moody and aggressive, even violent towards Amy. The diary culminates in the final entry before Amy's disappearance, where she writes: "*This man [Nick] might kill me*" (*GG*, 231, italics in original). Immediately after this, however, comes the midpoint twist, where it is revealed that Amy has in fact staged her own murder, and that the diary entries were fabricated and specifically left for the police to find in order to frame Nick. Here, Amy's half of the narrative switches from the diary entries to the present day and the aftermath of her disappearance. She has disguised herself and is now on the run, ultimately intending to kill herself to finish her plot to indict Nick. Nick realizes that

Amy is behind her own abduction at the same time as the reader does, but because the police predictably do not believe him, he ends up hiring a lawyer to prove his innocence. Meanwhile, Amy's meticulous plan is thwarted when she gets robbed at a campground she is staying at and is left with no money to go on. Not knowing what else to do, she calls Desi Collings, a man she used to date in high school and who apparently stalked her for months after their breakup. She tells him that she had to fake her death in order to escape her abusive husband, and he happily takes her to his secluded summer home. This, however, also backfires when Desi starts dictating Amy's looks and actions and essentially prevents her from leaving. In the end, she manufactures evidence of Desi abusing her, after which she kills him with a box cutter and escapes. She returns to Nick in the midst of a media spectacle, and although Nick now knows what Amy is capable of, she manages to manipulate him into staying with her by getting herself pregnant and leveraging that against him. In the end, there is no evidence of Amy's violence, and she ends up facing next to no consequences for her actions – she remains unapologetically violent to the end.

The exact genre of Flynn's novels has been disputed by both academics and literary critics. Sutton (2018) considers *Gone Girl* particularly tricky to pin down due to its metafictional awareness of the conventions of the detective fiction genre. While this self-referentiality might be particularly pronounced in *Gone Girl*, it is also present in subtler forms in *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places*, especially when it comes to playing with the readers' expectations regarding gender and violence. As Burke (2018) points out, all three novels explicitly address questions of female victimhood and thus criticize the notion – often also found in detective fiction – that certain women or girls are seen as "good victims" while others are not. In addition, they also foreground women and girls as perpetrators of violence as Flynn (2015) states she intended them to do. While most of the murder victims in the novels are female, so are all the murderers. Furthermore, even the female characters that are not actual murderers display varying degrees of aggressive and violent behavior, either towards themselves or towards others. This applies even to the victims of the (apparent) murders, especially in *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*. Thus, Flynn's inclusion of female violence is not limited to a single evil villain per novel, what Flynn calls a "dismissably bad […] psycho bitch" (Burkeman 2013, n.p.). Rather, the different characters all have more or less clear motivations for their actions, and as their motives vary, so do the outward expressions of their aggression. However, their actions are not entirely as far outside conventional norms regarding women and violence as Flynn herself claims in her interviews. Some of the characters, despite Flynn's

stated efforts to the contrary, end up perpetrating existing stereotypes by conforming to popular narratives used to rationalize female violence.

1.2 Theoretical Background

Violence committed by women has always been a particularly controversial issue, for both criminologists and feminists. In fact, until fairly recently, female violence and criminal offending in general had not been studied at length (Morrissey 2003). As feminist criminologists have since argued, however, women's criminality requires special study distinct from the study of male offending due to the different ways that the two are perceived in modern Western society (ibid.). Lloyd (1995) points out that "[w]hen women commit violent crimes they are seen to have breached two laws: the law of the land, which forbids violence, and the much more fundamental 'natural' law, which says women are passive carers, not active aggressors" (36). While violent men are only seen as guilty of breaking the law, violent women are also breaking the role assigned to them based on their gender; thus, violent women are seen as "doubly deviant" (Heidensohn 1996, 46). Perhaps because of this added layer of deviance, women's violence continues to fascinate the general public. One study found that women's violence is overrepresented in crime reporting, and that relatively minor cases of female violence are often reported on, while similar crimes by men are not considered newsworthy (Naylor 2001). Naylor goes on to explain this phenomenon: "Reported violence by women is arguably seen by news producers as more deviant, more anxiety-producing, and more transgressive than men's violence. Women's violence is perceived as more in *need* of explanation" (2001, 188, italics in original). This need to explain women's violence originates in the stereotypical idea that violence is not natural for women as it is for men, so there must be something more behind it to cause women to go out of their way to commit violence.

There is, however, another reason for the need to rationalize women's violent behavior. As Seal (2010) contends: "Women's use of violence poses a threat to the gender order that subordinates them – it issues a challenge to the supremacy of masculine power and the social control of women" (7). In other words, the transgressive nature of women's violence threatens the stability of the patriarchal system by challenging the notion of passive and nonviolent womanhood. This threat can be decreased by the use of conventionalized discourses either to explain women's violence in more traditionally feminine terms or to distance them from womanhood entirely. Both tactics allow for the continued existence of traditional femininity and the institution of gender as a stable category. These discourses are most commonly divided into three principal ways of conceptualizing violent women: as either victims, mad or bad. An

early version of this categorization is presented by Worrall (1990), who uses the terms sick, greedy and needy, after the words of one prosecutor in her source material. According to her, women's criminal offending is often seen by courts as being motivated by either sickness, selfish greed or a genuine need (81-2). Wilczynski (1991) analyzes gendered court discourse in the context of infanticide, using the same terms that will be used in this thesis – mad, bad, victim – although she only focuses on the first two, with the category of victim implicitly included under the label of mad. In a later article, she shows that in the British justice system, in cases where a parent has killed their child, men were more likely to be construed as bad, while women were more often labeled as mad, thus emphasizing the importance of the mad label in the common understanding of violent women (Wilczynski 1997). Morrissey (2003) also focuses on the mad and bad categories, but also identifies a "more recent rise of a third strategy to deny female agency" (34), essentially the category of victim. Meloy and Miller (2009), who studied newspaper coverage of violent female offenders, found that mental illness, perceived character defects and previous victimization were the most common factors brought up in the articles reporting on female violence. Comack and Brickey (2007), then, analyze self-reported motives of incarcerated women and utilize the common three-way split of conceptualizing violent women either as victims, mad or bad. Other, more expansive typologies of the conventional ways of portraying female violence have also been proposed (Seal 2010), but for the purposes of this thesis, I will be using the most commonly recognized triumvirate of victim, mad or bad.

According to the first one of these discourses, women's violence is often reasoned to be the result of their own previous victimization. This rationalization originates largely in feminist work, where second-wave feminists in the 1970s began drawing attention to patriarchal violence against women and emphasizing women's position as victims of violence. This positioning held even after violence perpetrated by women became a more widely acknowledged issue (Comack and Brickey 2007). According to many feminist scholars, women's violent offending is a direct result of the violence they face either from individuals, usually men, or the patriarchal society at large. A typical example of this is when a woman kills her abusive partner, or when a woman's violent behavior is attributed to childhood abuse (ibid.). The strength of this approach is that it addresses the patriarchal society that women act in and thus acknowledges some of the structural and systemic factors that contribute to women's violent offending. While it has been shown that many women convicted of violent crimes have histories of past abuse (Comack and Brickey 2007, Peter 2006), it is nevertheless an inadequate explanation for all of women's violence as a phenomenon, and in fact reinforces negative female stereotypes and gender roles by positioning women as passive and unable to control

their own actions (Morrissey 2003). This discourse depicts women's violence as reactive, never active, and thus strips women of their agency in favor of a generalized victim position.

Another way of rationalizing female violence by way of denying women's agency is the portrayal of violent women as mad. Women who commit violent acts are more likely than their male counterparts to be considered "mad" or mentally ill, and more likely to be diagnosed with psychological disorders than other, non-criminalized women (Comack and Brickey 2007). Furthermore, women's violence is often attributed to their "pathological minds" or bodies (Comack and Brickey 2007, 14). This narrative is closely connected to and partially originates in the victim narrative. Women's presumed victim position has often been pathologized by identifying their victimhood as a trigger for or an indicator of mental illness, which in turn leads to violence (Comack and Brickey 2007). Perhaps the most notorious example of this is Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS), "a condition supposedly brought on by the experience of domestic abuse" (Seal 2010, 50). It has been used in several countries as a valid defense in court, although it only serves to "pathologise socially lived experiences of abuse" (ibid.). Furthermore, although victims of domestic violence can be of any gender, BWS is, as the name suggests, only seen to affect female victims (ibid.), which further highlights the gendered bias in the treatment of both victims of abuse and perpetrators of violence. While some women who commit violent acts undoubtedly are mentally ill, the problem with using pathologization as a standard explanation is that, like the victim narrative, it erases the agency and responsibility of the women and ignores the systemic factors, such as class and race, that are also at play (Comack and Brickey 2007, Morrissey 2003, Peter 2006).

Both the victim and mad discourses seek to explain female violence in a way that does not threaten conventional notions of femininity, as victimhood and "madness" are not fundamentally contradictory to the notion of passive and weak womanhood (O'Neill and Seal 2012, Worrall 1990). There is, however, another way of attempting to neutralize the threat to patriarchal conceptions of gender that women's violence poses: distancing violent women from womanhood using the "bad" discourse (ibid.). This discourse has recently gained popularity in part as a response to the feminist movement's positioning of women as victims even when they are the perpetrators, and the subsequent denial of women's responsibility for their own violent actions (Berns 2001). This view maintains that women commit violence because they are in some way evil or have failed in their role as a woman. Although this narrative grants women their agency and responsibility, it does nevertheless uphold stereotypical ideas of appropriate womanhood by creating a stark divide between violent and nonviolent women: "the Violent Woman is clearly the 'Other,' and so very much the opposite of her law-abiding sisters"

(Comack and Brickey 2007, 20). This allows women, as long as they are "law-abiding," to be conceptualized comfortably within the confines of stereotypical femininity, while "[the Violent Woman's] actions betrayed her womanhood" (Comack and Brickey 2007, 2). Like the "mad" discourse, this also erases systemic and societal factors by placing the blame solely on the individual woman's failed gender performance. As Morrissey notes, "[c]ontemporary legal discourse's reliance on stereotypes like these to represent female defendants means that women's crimes are never adequately explained" (2003, 33). The actual causes behind women's violent offending cannot be analyzed so long as these conventionalized discourses dominate the way that violent women are discussed both in the justice system and in the media. One way of beginning to undermine these discourses is to question the way that they are used in popular media, such as Flynn's novels, which also contribute to the wider cultural conceptualization of women's violence.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The aim of this thesis, as stated, is to identify points of connection between Flynn's novels and common stereotypes of violent women and to determine whether Flynn's portrayals of her characters reinforce or subvert these stereotypes. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I will discuss the archetype of the violent teen girl. I begin by identifying a recent change in the public perception of young girls and their aggression. This new conception of the teenage girl as fundamentally mean and relationally aggressive but nonviolent is prevalent in all three of Flynn's novels. I argue that Flynn's violent girl characters are remarkably aware of the way in which they are perceived by society as well as of their prescribed role in it. Furthermore, I argue that they are able to manipulate their own public image to comply with these societal expectations in order to hide their true violence and thus subvert the stereotype of the mean girl. In this chapter, I will also examine how sexuality and violence are inextricably linked in Flynn's novels, especially for the teen girls, and how this relates to the ongoing public discussion about the sexualization of girls and reinforces the perceived connection between sexual excess and criminal offending.

Chapter 3, in turn, will focus on violent mothers and the heritability of violence as they are portrayed in the novels. Variations of the archetype of the violent mother appear in all of Flynn's novels, and in the first part of this chapter I analyze the different manifestations of maternal violence. I distinguish the mother characters both by who their violence is directed at – their children, other people or themselves – and by how their violence is rationalized in their respective narratives – namely, whether they are presented as "mad," "bad" or something else entirely. I then move beyond just the mothers and examine the different ways in which they

pass down their violent behavior to their daughters. In the novels, this can happen in one of two ways: through either victimization or genetics. The first one emphasizes the "victim" rationalization of women's violence, although Flynn subverts this trope slightly by making the abuse occur exclusively between women, usually from mother to daughter. The idea of violence as a hereditary trait – without the presence of parental abuse – is also flouted in all three novels. Within the context of these narratives, however, it is ultimately shown to be false, as only direct abuse ever manages to transfer violent behavior from one generation to the next.

2. Violent Girls

In a 2006 article, Jessica Ringrose lays out the (at the time) recent developments in the public discourse surrounding teenage girls and violence. During the 1990s and the early 2000s, violence between and perpetrated by teenage and preteen girls was garnering increasing amounts of media attention and public outrage. This rise in public concern was sparked by recent discoveries in developmental psychology, where the violence of young girls had begun to be studied as a distinct phenomenon from the violence of boys, as well as the since-questioned arrest rates showing an increase in violent crime committed by girls (Irwin and Chesney-Lind 2008). These concerns were raised in all forms of media, from magazines to daytime television and, inevitably, fiction. *Sharp Objects*, the first of Flynn's novels and arguably the most centered around violence committed by young girls, was originally published in 2006, the same year as Ringrose's article. As such, *Sharp Objects* – and by extension her other novels – can be seen as part of the very same cultural wave of intrigue that Ringrose identifies, picking up on and exploring those topical questions in fictional form and both reinforcing and fighting against some of those concerns. Throughout her three novels, Flynn brings out a varied cast of violent girls who perform a wide array of different violent acts, from self-harm to emotional manipulation and cold-blooded murder. In this chapter, I will examine the different ways that Flynn's girls' violent tendencies are manifested and connect them to the ongoing real-world cultural discussion about violent girls, which Flynn's novels both were born out of and continue to feed into. I will first analyze the various ways in which the girls in Flynn's novels manipulate gendered stereotypes and expectations to perpetuate and hide their violence, and then go on to discuss the ways in which sexuality and violence are linked for all the characters we see as teenagers.

2.1 Manipulation of Gender Stereotypes

One common factor that comes across in most of the teen girl characters in all three novels is that they display a keen awareness of the gender roles and stereotypes that are prevalent in their particular social context. Crucially, they are not only aware of these ideas, but are able to manipulate them in various ways in order to further their own ends. This happens in different ways for each of the characters with different aims in mind, but fundamentally all of them – by which I am mainly here referring to Amma, Amy and Diondra, the three "main" violent girls – are shown to be able to anticipate the ways that they as girls (or women) will be perceived by the surrounding society. Moreover, they then know exactly how to manipulate their own

external behavior and public image in order to either inflict harm on other people or hide their violent actions.

Ringrose (2006) makes a distinction between normative "mean" girls and deviant violent girls. This divide has been created by the recent increase in media attention to developments in postfeminist developmental psychology, specifically claims about a rise in girls' aggression and violence. According to Ringrose, increasing amounts of attention have been paid to supposedly gender-specific forms of violence, namely indirect and relational aggression, in order to assert that girls can be equally violent as boys. She problematizes this increasingly common discourse and points out that it has resulted in "the shift from a universalized vulnerable girl to a universalized aggressive/mean girl" (406). Through this popular developmental discourse, girls' indirect violence is represented as Other from the masculine direct violence and thus pathologized, and feminism is proposed as both the cause and the solution to girls' violent behavior. Furthermore, this type of female aggression is normalized as part of girlhood, which in turn renders actually aggressive and violent girls as Other, outside essentialized notions of femininity. Although this particular discourse is relatively recent, it is rooted in a long tradition of theories of women's supposed inherent criminality or their "pathological minds" (Comack and Brickey 2007, 14), and is thus closely aligned with the "mad" narrative. Ringrose also notes that the concern over girls' inherent meanness is "predicated on a girl subjectivity that is both white and middle class" (2006, 416), as the acts of girls who transgress these categories are masculinized and thus distanced from femininity. The cultural image of the indirectly aggressive middle-class mean girl is reproduced and further normalized in fictional discourse, such as Flynn's novels depicting violent teen girls. Flynn's girls, however, "appear as though they have grown up in a modern media culture and thus instinctively intuit its performative requirements" (Redhead 2018, 130). As such, they aware of this new norm and their status as white and (upper) middle-class girls and can use it to their advantage.

2.1.1 The Old and New Normal: Amma (Natalie, Ann)

The character who most clearly utilizes the mean girl image is Amma in *Sharp Objects*. Amma is the 13-year-old half-sister of the protagonist and narrator Camille, who lives in the small town of Wind Gap, Missouri, as the daughter of a wealthy family. Due to her big age difference to Camille, she has essentially grown up as an only child, so much so that Camille does not recognize her in the beginning of the novel when she first arrives in town to report on the murders. This is significant because as the sole child of older, wealthy parents, Amma has grown accustomed to a certain level of attention, both in terms of emotion and material goods,

from her parents. Before any outright violent tendencies of hers are shown in the narrative, Amma is already shown to be skilled at manipulating the way others perceive her. Camille, as her sister, has a unique view of the way Amma adjusts her personality, attitude and physical appearance depending on the person she is around. In the presence of her parents, especially her mother Adora, Amma performs what Redhead (2018, 124) calls "the baby doll" role – in Amma's own words, "[Adora's] little doll" (*SO*, 54). This means presenting traditional Southern femininity and even childish innocence: she wears girly, childish dresses and her hair carefully curled and spends her time at home tending to her dollhouse, which is a custom replica of the mansion they live in. Around her friends, on the other hand, she by design appears much older than her years, dressing revealingly and speaking crudely; Redhead refers to this side of her as "the Lolita" (2018, 124). This out-on-the-town Amma and her group of friends are stereotypical – if unusually heavily sexualized – mean girls as Ringrose defines it. They are presented as mean bullies towards everyone: other kids in town, adults like Camille, and even each other, as Amma – the leader of the group – occasionally turns on the others. Camille herself labels them as mean girls, which crucially means that despite their provocative behavior and verbal harassment, they are not seen as a real threat, and certainly not a violent one. They are compared to a group of Camille's old high school friends, now grown women, who still act like stereotypical mean girls, exchanging at times cruel gossip about various people – even teenagers – in town, but never resorting to physical violence.

This image of Amma as just another in an intergenerational line of girl bullies is broken, however, when it is discovered in the end that it was in fact Amma who killed the two girls with the help of her friends. Throughout the novel, it has been implied that the act Amma put on for her parents was her only one and that the "mean Amma" was more or less her real self, but the revelation of her as the murderer sets this into question. It appears, then, that the mean girl act was in fact yet another performance, designed to throw suspicion off her. Even though Ringrose frames the concern over mean girls as relatively recent, in *Sharp Objects* it is clearly not a new one, as Amma is routinely compared to Camille's generation and, in turn, to Adora's. This existing history of normalized teen meanness would not have escaped Amma: the worst that these characters aside from Amma turn out to be is idle gossips and avowed anti-feminists, never actually violent. Throughout the novel, Amma's main driving force is a need for attention, mainly from her mother; her self-imposed position as *the* mean girl allows her to manipulate attention from everyone around her and, eventually, to kill three girls who she perceives as stealing Adora's and Camille's attention from her. The suspicion never lands on her, despite the widespread awareness of her meanness among the people in town. She successfully

navigates between performing a very traditional Southern femininity and "the new normal" (Ringrose 2006, 413), a mean girl – both normalized modes of girlhood which fundamentally presume harmlessness and thus allow her to hide her true violence until she is finally caught red-handed.

Amma is not the only violent girl in *Sharp Objects*, however. Notably, Amma's two main victims, Ann Nash and Natalie Keene, both had violent tempers. Specifically, both were known to bite people severely enough to leave scars. Ann is also said to have killed a bird with a stick once and to have intentionally stabbed Natalie with a needle at school. Natalie went even further and once attacked a girl with scissors, stabbing her both eyes, of which only one could be saved. In addition, Amma later tells Camille that both girls used to go out into the woods with her and "hurt things together", one time killing a cat (*SO*, 319). While these incidents are common knowledge in the town of Wind Gap, the image of the girls that is presented in the media in the aftermath of their murders is quite different. Since they were not even teenagers yet – Ann was nine, Natalie ten – they are portrayed as particularly innocent and sympathetic victims by the news outlets in the narrative, including Camille's own initial report. Unlike Amma, though, they never intentionally portrayed themselves in a way that matched stereotypical expectations for them: both girls are described by locals as tomboys. As the specifics of their violent outbursts unfold over the course of the narrative, the townspeople that Camille talks to begin to speculate that they may have been killed specifically because of their violence and nonconformity, as the removal of their teeth appears to match up with the girls' habit of biting. Miller (2019) comes to the same conclusion, stating that the girls were killed because "[their] deviant transgressions of cultural boundaries must be punished to protect the social order" (11). In the novel, Camille also comes to believe this when she recognizes a scar on Adora's wrist as a bitemark and becomes convinced that Adora killed the girls. In the end, it turns out that Amma's reason for killing Ann and Natalie was in fact partially rooted in their violence, as she herself tells Camille: "'And why did Ann have to bite… her [Adora]? I couldn't stop thinking about it. Why Ann could bite her, and I couldn't'" (*SO*, 320). Amma is jealous not only of the attention the girls got from Adora, but also of their ability to hurt her in a way that Amma wanted to but could not. In the end, then, while the media within the narrative rushes to paint the murdered girls in a virtuous light after death, their refusal to hide their violence while still alive is ultimately what got them killed.

2.1.2 Gender Stereotypes as a Cover: Amy

Amy in *Gone Girl* does something similar to Amma in *Sharp Objects*, though Amy takes it a step further than simply hiding behind a veil of nonviolent femininity. For the entirety of the novel, Amy is an adult, but later in the narrative there are various glimpses into her as a teenager, specifically in terms of her history with violence. Essentially, teen Amy's violence is the same as adult Amy's: her method of choice from at least the age of 15 has been physically hurting herself and framing someone else for it, usually as punishment for some perceived wrong the framed person has done her. At 15, she threw herself down a set of stairs, cracking her ribs and arm and twisting her ankle, and claimed she was pushed by her best friend Hilary Handy – a claim which everyone believed because for the past several months Amy had been getting Hilary to do things that would eventually implicate her, such as calling and stalking Amy's parents' house under the guise of harmless pranks. As a result, Hilary was labeled crazy within their school and was forced to move out of town. Amy's reasons for this persecution range from petty (getting a slightly better grade than Amy) to inane (forgetting Amy is allergic to strawberries). Also in high school, Amy dated Desi Collings, whom she later kills, and was from the beginning manipulative towards him: she appealed to his protective instinct by telling him she had been molested by her father, and later, after their breakup, convinced people that Desi had attempted suicide in her bed, which she also later admits is a lie. Around this same time, she also scratched up her own face and told Desi his mother – who Amy thought was too close with Desi and who vocally did not like Amy – had done it to her, causing him and his mother to stop speaking to each other entirely.

These brief glimpses into teenage Amy, given in fragments scattered throughout the novel, show that her extensive plan to frame Nick is not an individual event, but rather an escalation of the method she had already perfected as a teen. Especially in Hilary Handy's case, Amy displays significant patience and long-term planning. Teenage Amy, like adult Amy, is above all vengeful, but she is not reckless about it as one might expect a teenager to be. Instead, she shows that she is expert at understanding the ways people are perceived and, consequently, in manipulating those perceptions. She originally befriended Hilary because she was an outsider at their boarding school and thus in a position to be easily manipulated by Amy, whom Hilary later describes as "The Girl" – beautiful, popular, famous from her parents' *Amazing Amy* books (*GG*, 324). Amy has Hilary running her errands for her, but when she eventually gets tired of Hilary, Amy decides to take her down by positing that she was obsessed with Amy and wanted to kill Amy so she could become her. Amy uses a very similar narrative with Desi, claiming that he was obsessed with her to the point of attempting suicide after their breakup, which he

never actually did. This particular choice of narrative shows keen awareness of the way that she herself is perceived by others. Amy is repeatedly described along the lines of: "Men want her, and women want to be her" (186), which she clearly knew already at a young age and was able to turn to her advantage. Like Amma, teenage Amy maintains the appearance of a regular, slightly manipulative but ultimately harmless mean girl, and uses it to hide her true violent intentions. Unlike Amma's, Amy's victims live to tell the tale, but because of her careful manipulation of both her own image and that of her victims, no one ever believes that she could be capable of doing such a thing. A man Amy later framed for rape in her 20s exclaims at one point to Nick that she has "*graduated to murder*" (312, italics in original). In many ways, adult Amy's violence can be seen as a maturation of her teenage violence, growing into her violence with age rather than out of it.

2.1.3 Gender Stereotypes as Manipulation: Diondra

In *Dark Places*, Diondra displays some of the same sensibility as Amy in *Gone Girl*. After strangling Libby's sister Michelle for threatening to tell their mother about her pregnancy, Diondra lets Ben take the blame for it. She knows that his guilt will never be questioned due to the conventional gender stereotypes prevalent in their small town, and she is proved right when the police eventually create a profile of the Day Massacre killer and use it to convict Ben, even though it in fact fits Diondra much better. Unlike in *Gone Girl*, this shifting of the blame is not exactly a violent act in itself, as Ben himself insists on taking the responsibility and going to prison to protect Diondra and their unborn child; she does not frame Ben the way Amy frames her victims. However, it is necessary to take into account here the whole context of Ben and Diondra's relationship leading up to the night of the murders, as Ben's need to act as protector for what he sees as his family is at least partially due to months of manipulation and emotional abuse by Diondra. Where Amy's manipulation of her victims is highly goal-oriented and calculated, especially for her age as a teenager, Diondra's is more noticeably adolescent: impulsive, less subtle, and aimed to derive short-term pleasure rather than long-ranging consequences. It is also not acted out of revenge; rather, she manipulates Ben solely because she can, for her own pleasure and convenience, not because she sees herself as wronged the way Amy does.

Diondra and Ben's relationship is tinged with violence and manipulation from the beginning. They first met when Diondra hit Ben with her car while drunk, then got out of the car to yell at him. Ben responded by apologizing despite being the one who had been run over, and as soon as he did so, Diondra's whole demeanor changed, and she suddenly "got real

sweet," offered to drive him home, and then took him to get drunk with her instead; they started dating soon after (*DP*, 98). Though it is not apparent to Ben, it is apparent to the reader that Diondra only took an interest in him after she "realized he wasn't going to get angry at her" for hurting him and would, instead, instinctively apologize to her for her own actions (ibid.), marking him as an easy target for abuse and manipulation. Another significant aspect that makes Ben especially vulnerable to Diondra is his ongoing crisis regarding his masculinity. His main fear is being considered useless: "He wanted to be a useful man, but he wasn't sure how to make that happen, and it scared him shitless" (57). At fifteen, he considers himself to be the man of the family, since his father left them, but feels he is failing in the role – his deadbeat father looks down on him and considers him, to Ben's mind, "a pussy," and even his mother is better with a gun than Ben is (ibid.). This leaves him desperate to prove his masculinity through any means possible, and this is where Diondra crucially comes in. She is older than Ben, and in many ways more experienced, and thus already holds a fair amount of power over him. In addition to this, she quickly hones in on Ben's fragile sense of masculinity and does not hesitate to use it to her advantage. She repeatedly gets Ben to do things he does not want to do by questioning his masculinity: infantilizing him by calling him "cute" (148) and "baby" (152) in a mocking tone, making fun of his poor family and his sexual inexperience, comparing him to her older, hypermasculine cousin Trey, all of which makes him feel "like a girl whose dress just shot up in the wind" (195). Thus, Diondra's use of gender stereotypes is twofold: she uses them as a personalized tool of manipulation and also to avoid suspicion for her violence.

The fact that all three girls – Amma, Amy and Diondra – at least initially get away with their violence is not solely due to their deliberate manipulation of stereotypes, however; their successful evasion of guilt is deeply rooted in each of their positions within society. All three girls are white and have grown up in markedly wealthy homes, which affords them privileges that many other girls – even many other girls in the novels – do not have access to. In fact, as Ringrose points out, the "new normal" of the mean girl only really applies to white and middle-class girls; their relational aggression is categorized simultaneously as normal and concerning, while non-white and working-class girls fall outside the norm by default (2006, 416). In essence, then, the girls I have analyzed here actually need to do fairly little to conceal their crimes, as the surrounding society already presumes them not (physically) violent until proven otherwise. As I have shown, they do display awareness of this fact, whether consciously or not, and know how to more effectively hide behind the norm: Amma and Amy both manipulate their appearance and personality and play different versions of themselves like characters,

performing conventional femininity whenever they need to appear innocent. Diondra, however, is not overly concerned with appearances, and there are cracks in Amma's façade, too, which goes to show that especially outside of their homes, they can trust their social standing to exonerate them of any serious violent crimes, even if their relationally aggressive tendencies are widely known.

2.2 Sexuality and Violence

In all three novels, but especially in *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places*, the teenage girl characters are conspicuously sexualized. More crucially, their highlighted sexuality is often explicitly linked to their violence, although most of them do not commit sexual violence as such (as defined in Krug et al. 2002). Rather, their fundamentally nonsexual violence is seen as sexualized due to the repeated highlighting of their physical presentation and bodies and their active – though sometimes fabricated – desire. Furthermore, their sexuality is itself seen as violent, as it is brought up only in the context of their violent behavior and often explicitly linked to it. This is typical of the "bad" rationalization of female violence, where other behaviors that are considered unfeminine – such as sexual excess – are seen as indicators of an underlying female evil which in turn results in violent actions (Peter 2006, Meloy and Miller 2009).

2.2.1 Sexualized Violence, Violent Sexuality: *Sharp Objects*

Amma is perhaps the most striking example of this merging of sexuality and violence. At thirteen, she is the youngest of the girls discussed here, and as Camille notes on first seeing her, she is "barely in her teens" (*SO*, 14). From this first meeting, where Camille does not yet recognize Amma, she is defined by her apparent sexuality, as Camille describes how "her hair was parted in ribbons, but her breasts, which she aimed proudly outward, were those of a grown woman. A lucky grown woman" (ibid.). This contrasting of Amma's young age and what seems to Camille an age-inappropriate presentation of sexuality is present in every description of Amma up to and including when Camille finally meets her at their house and recognizes her as her sister (14, 42, 54). In their first meeting, the two sides of Amma are starkly contrasted. Camille notes that she "looked entirely her age – thirteen – for the first time since I'd seen her," and then goes on to correct herself: "Actually, no. […] Those clothes were more appropriate for a ten-year-old" (54). Another example of this contrast comes when Amma is talking to Willis, the police detective investigating the murders and later Camille's lover. Camille

describes Amma as so clear-skinned and "unfinished" that "she could have just popped out of the womb," but at the same time she is wearing a tiny miniskirt and deliberately flirting with Willis (145). Notably, according to Camille's evaluation, Amma never looks "entirely her age"; at home, she dresses like a younger child, whereas outside the house she presents herself like an adult, and a particularly provocative adult at that. It is unclear what the age-appropriate presentation for her would be, as Amma is at thirteen at an age difficult to define – not a small child but not quite yet a real teenager, either. Amma displays self-awareness of this when she explains her volatile behavior to Camille by stating that she is "just going through a phase" (84). Camille later terms her the "woman-child" (173), juxtaposing her body and her childlike need for parental attention. By definition, then, she is always acting inappropriately for her age, as her age cannot be categorized in simple terms into any specific mode of appropriateness.

It is around the time of this encounter with Willis that Camille first begins to see the pattern of Amma's violent behavior. She follows Amma to a pig farm where she witnesses Amma gleefully watching the suffering sows, and afterwards begins to put together her "violent streak," at this point consisting still of unsettling yet relatively tame outbursts such as a childish temper tantrum and hitting one of her friends (128). Later, though, as Amma is trying to provoke yet another older boy, her sexuality is explicitly linked to violence, even identified as a form of violence in itself: "Amma's sexual offerings seemed a form of aggression. Long skinny legs and slim wrists and high, babied voice, all aimed like a gun. *Do what I want; I might like you*" (194-5, italics in original). Amma uses a deliberately infantilized display of her sexuality as a tool of manipulation in order to get what she most wants: attention. It is notable that despite Camille's outrage at Amma not acting her age, her sexuality is always linked not only with manipulation, but also a reference to her young age, something Camille herself highlights. Redhead notes that "Amma is knowingly channeling the Lolita figure" (2018, 124): she is aware of the fetishization of youth in the modern cultural context and uses it to maximize the effectiveness of her manipulation, especially using it to taunt 18-year-old John Keene, brother of one of the victims, who is suspected of killing the girls. Just as Amma manipulates girls and women with her performance of gender roles and specifically the mean girl image, she controls boys and men by overtly sexualizing herself before they have the chance to and weaponizing it, turning it back on them.

Camille's reaction to Amma's displays is, at least initially, along the lines of the general moral panic surrounding the perceived premature sexualization of girls. Ringrose (2013) identifies this concern over the sexualization of young girls as a phenomenon that is linked to the recent rise of postfeminism, which has been defined as "a set of politics and discourses

grounded in assumptions that gender equity has now been achieved for girls and women in education, the workplace and the home" (Ringrose 2013, 1). According to this view, the feminist campaign for women's sexual freedom has put too much emphasis on women freely expressing their sexuality and thus resulted in younger and younger girls becoming sexualized. Renold and Ringrose (2011) argue against this discourse of sexualization because among other things, it denies girls' agency and creates a binary view of girls as either "objectified, innocent passive victims" or "knowledgeable, savvy navigators" (391). Ringrose (2013) also points out that the moral anxiety over girls' loss of childhood innocence only concerns a specific kind of girl: white and, crucially, middle class. Girls who fall outside of these parameters are hypersexualized, and the anxiety over middle-class girls' sexualization originates in their perceived adoption of this kind of working-class femininity.

This certainly applies to Amma: as mentioned, she is decidedly (upper) middle class, and Camille's feelings on her inappropriate appearance and behavior fluctuate between shock and concern. When Amma is flirting with John Keene – her most provocative performance in the novel – Camille expresses a wish to protect her from John, even though all he does in the scene is reject Amma's advances: "I didn't like John Keene flirting with Amma, no matter how provocative she was being. She was still thirteen" (195). To Camille's mind, then, she is both behaving inappropriately for her age and in need of protection from adults – precisely the two aspects of the moral panic that Ringrose (2013) and Renold and Ringrose (2011) identify. Camille's equally appalled reactions to Amma's violent streak and sexual expression seem to be validated when it is discovered that Amma is, in fact, the killer. The town that declared Amma as trouble due to her overt sexuality is proven right when she is shown to be violent, linking the two perceived moral collapses together.

Of course, Camille's view of Amma and her sexuality is also influenced by her own past experiences as a teenager, of which there are flashes of throughout the novel. Perhaps the most significant experience that defines both teenage Camille's relationship to sex and her own sexuality and adult Camille's opinion on Amma's sexuality is her sexual assault. At thirteen, the same age that Amma is in the main timeline of the novel, Camille was gang-raped at a party by a group of older boys who got her drunk and "kind of passed her around" (*SO*, 139). Though she refuses even as an adult to recognize this as rape, it is nonetheless true that her most formative experience with sex is inextricably tied to violence. In fact, this is the case from her earliest sexual experiences. She recalls always being fascinated by boys who were "blood hunters" and masturbating for the first time at the age of twelve after seeing one such boy's hunting shed containing a graphic mix of bloodied animal carcasses and images of naked

women from porn magazines (18). Not long before the gang rape, she was coerced into oral sex by a high school senior (142). This was around the same time when she first started self-harming by cutting words into herself, and her cutting also had from the beginning a sexual undercurrent. The first word she cut was "wicked," carved into her pelvis, and many of the words she cut later have more or less explicit sexual connotations. For teenage Camille, sex is linked to her self-harm and vice versa – though, ironically, her fear of someone seeing her scars prevents her from engaging in sexual relationships as an adult. Later, she briefly expresses admiration for Amma's use of her sexuality to get what she wants, contrasting it to her own teenage self: "When I'd been sad, I hurt myself. Amma hurt other people. When I'd wanted attention, I'd submitted myself to boys: *Do what you want; just like me*" (194, italics in original). For both, sex becomes a method of violence; the only difference is that where Amma directs this violence towards others, Camille turns it on herself.

2.2.2 Sex as the Means and the End: *Dark Places*

Teenage Diondra in *Dark Places* is also heavily sexualized throughout. Her portrayal is distinct from Amma and teen Camille in many ways, but she is similar to them in one respect: she is also (upper) middle class. In her first introduction, she is sexualized by Ben in a very particular manner: "Diondra, his girl with the name that made him think of princesses or strippers, he wasn't sure which. She was a little of both: rich but sleazy" (*DP*, 56-7). Here she is immediately established as wealthy, as opposed to the poor Day family, but she is described partially in working-class terms due to her sexuality or "sleaziness." As Ringrose (2013, 47-8) remarks, sex work and sexual excess have been historically associated with working-class women, so Ben's description of Diondra as either a princess or a stripper casts her from the onset in an ambiguous light. Later, it is implied that Diondra is actually toeing the line between her upper-class heritage and poverty. Her strict and abusive father has threatened to "literally kill her if he ever found out she was pregnant outside of marriage" or "even did it outside of marriage" (*DP*, 247), which leaves running away – without her inheritance – as the only option, as she would soon no longer be able to hide the pregnancy. Adult Diondra, in fact, ends up living in relative poverty, so her being coded as working class early on becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy caused by her sexuality (the pregnancy) and violence (the murder of Michelle). Diondra not only approaches working-class womanhood due to her violent sexuality, but fully achieves it, and in the process embodies the anxieties associated with the sexualization of girls.

There are also other differences to the girls portrayed in *Sharp Objects*. First, Diondra is significantly older, 17, at the time of the Day Massacre. She is also more explicitly violent than

Amma, whose violence we only get glimpses of before the final reveal at the end. Diondra, on the other hand, is from her first introduction immediately associated with violence: "Maybe he'd [Ben] get a good bruise too. Diondra would like that, she'd brush one soft fingertip over it, circle it once or twice and give it a poke so she could tease him when he jumped" (*DP*, 56). This introduces right away her habit of manipulating Ben, as well as foreshadowing her capability for physical violence. Her violence is also linked to her sexuality in more complex ways than Amma's or Camille's, who mostly use it as a tool of manipulation and self-harm, respectively. Diondra also uses sex to manipulate Ben: as was discussed in the previous section, she repeatedly uses Ben's embarrassment over his sexual inexperience against him. Where she most differs from the other girls discussed here, however, is that for her sex is not only the means, but also the end. Ben describes her as "sex-crazed" (107), and it seems to be one of her primary motivations for manipulating Ben. Furthermore, she is the only one of Flynn's girls, or women for that matter, who commits outright sexual violence. Ben himself admits that Diondra has "made him" perform oral sex on her several times (246), and their other encounters can be seen to be coerced as well, though this is never explicitly stated. Ben does, however, describe feeling "gutted and depressed" and "like crying" after each time they have sex (203), which points towards the reading of their entire relationship as more or less coerced.

This brings up a final issue relating to the girls' portrayals with regard to sexuality: the question of active desire. Historically, women in fiction have been objects of male desire more often than active desiring subjects (Byerly and Ross 2006), but Flynn's girls in all three novels display their own desire in some way. They differ, however, not only in how that desire is manifested, but also in how genuinely felt it is. Redhead notes that Amma's desire, just like her embodiment of the Lolita figure, is "pure performance" and that she does not "actually desire sex, but control over the self and others" (2018, 124). Redhead also points out that Camille – as an adult – displays genuine active desire in pursuing first Detective Willis and then John Keene, but it should be added here that the case is very different for teenage Camille. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, she has sex with various older boys not because she wants to, but because she is either actively forced, or feels it is the only way for her to be liked. By contrast, in *Gone Girl*, teenage Amy is not sexualized in the same way that the other characters discussed here are – even her courtship with Desi was apparently entirely chaste – but adult Amy is repeatedly shown to fake desire in order to frame her partners for rape or, in the case of Desi, to lure him into a vulnerable position to kill him. In fact, Diondra appears to be the only one portrayed as a truly active desiring subject whose feelings are not a performance to further some other end.

What connects all these different portrayals of adolescent sexuality, though, is the explicit connection to violence. For each of them, violence has sexual undertones just as much as sex has violent undertones, which makes these girls doubly deviant. They are simultaneously transgressing the norms of childhood innocence and chastity, thus violating the expectation of nonviolence and deviating from the white middle-class femininity they are expected to perform. In performing direct physical violence and excessive sexuality, they fall outside the stereotypes reserved for women and girls of their class, and instead are closer to stereotypical depictions of racialized and working-class girls, though the surrounding society's tolerance for their behavior makes evident their privilege (Ringrose 2013). Especially in the case of Amma and Diondra, their sexuality is portrayed as shocking and is often described in violent terms, which then acts as a precursor to the final shock of their fatally violent acts. The final revelations of their violence also implicitly condemn their behavior portrayed earlier on in the narrative, including their sexual excess, whether feigned or genuine. In this aspect, by framing the girls' sexuality as an early indicator of their violent capabilities, the novels partially reinforce the "bad" narrative where both sexuality and violence are considered unfeminine and deviant. Thus, the novels can be seen to contribute to the wave of moral outrage and concern over the sexualization of girls that Ringrose (2013) describes, as they effectively link teenage sexuality and violence.

3. Mothers and Daughters

Motherhood, like female adolescence, is another aspect of womanhood that is highly stereotyped. In fact, motherhood forms a significant part of the general stereotypical view of women: as potential mothers, all women and girls are assumed to be kind and nurturing towards others, certainly not violent. For actual mothers, this expectation is even stronger: "Deeply embedded in motherhood is the belief that it is natural for women to love, and not harm, their children" (Peter 2006, 283). Despite these stereotypes, however, women do commit violence, and mothers are no exception. In Flynn's novels, in fact, violent mothers are more the rule than the exception: nearly every mother character in all three novels is violent in one way or another, and furthermore, their violence is directly related to their motherhood. In other words, they commit violence not despite the fact that they are mothers but because of it. In doing so, they are not only expressing their own aggression, but also passing it on to their children, specifically to their daughters, who in turn become violent girls and women themselves and, when they have daughters of their own, further continue this cycle of violence. Thus, Flynn's mother characters routinely break fundamental stereotypes about nurturing motherhood, but they do so in ways that often correspond with pathologized explanations for female violence generally and maternal violence specifically.

3.1 Violent Mothers

Violent mothers form a very particular and prominent category among violent women. On one hand, as mentioned, the underlying societal expectations for women and specifically mothers guarantee that a mother who commits violence, be it towards her child or other people, is always seen as shocking and deviant from the norm. On the other hand, motherhood has also been strongly pathologized throughout history in order to explain any non-normative behavior from women, including violence. Both in news discourse and in fiction, violent mothers are usually categorized as either mad (maternal instinct gone too far) or bad (insufficient maternal instinct) (Peter 2006). In Flynn's novels, the mother characters tend to fall mostly along these same lines, though there are exceptions to the rule as well. The violence of her mother characters takes many forms: it is physical violence and emotional abuse; it is directed at their own children and at other people, even other children; it is violence for the sake of violence and a means to an end. As such, some of the characters fall broadly into established tropes of maternal violence, while others resist such stereotypical readings and stand outside conventionalized notions of violent motherhood.

3.1.1 The "Mad" Mother: Adora

The intersection of violence and motherhood is most often brought up in cases where the mother hurts her own child. As Di Ciolla and Pasolini (2018) note, this form of violence is seen as particularly shocking because it goes against the most fundamental maternal stereotype: the protective mother and the myth of maternal instinct. Peter (2006) points out that "when a mother or female caregiver commits acts of violence toward her daughter, we are left with no socially acknowledged place to put this behavior" (283-4). Thus, mothers' violence remains a taboo subject which, if mentioned, is particularly shocking. Flynn utilizes the inherent shock value of this type of violence most notably in the character of Adora in *Sharp Objects*. Out of all of Flynn's mother characters, Adora is the only one to intentionally harm her own children. She abuses her three daughters both physically and, especially in the case of Camille, emotionally. Her main method of abuse is to make her children sick by poisoning them, so that she can then appear to be a good mother by taking care of them. Camille's younger sister Marian is described throughout the novel as a sickly child, culminating in her untimely death at the age of ten. Her sickliness and, in fact, her death are later explained to have been the result of Adora slowly and methodically poisoning her, rather than any naturally occurring illness. Camille, on the other hand, was not as severely poisoned as a child. As Adora wrote in her diary at the time, Camille was "never […] a good patient," only "angry and spiteful" while sick, so Adora decided to focus on "caring for" Marian instead (*SO*, 309). In the main timeline of the novel, however, when Camille is an adult, the pattern can be seen repeating itself as it becomes apparent that Adora has been poisoning Amma the same way she did Marian – over a long period of time, though less severely – and begins poisoning Camille as well when she arrives in town.

Adora also exemplifies one of the violent mother archetypes: the "mad" mother. At the end of the novel, Adora's behavior is explained to be due to Munchausen by Proxy (MBP), a behavior where a caretaker, usually a mother, "induce[s] illness in their children or subject[s] them to painful medical procedures in a quest for emotional satisfaction, such as attention from and control over others" (Feldman 2013, 121). Adora's behavior in the novel certainly fits this description, as her methodical poisoning is shown to be motivated by the need to appear as a good and caring mother, to evoke pity and attention from others and to keep her daughters fully under her control. Although Feldman stresses that "MBP is a form of maltreatment (abuse and neglect), not a mental disorder" (ibid.), it has often been understood by both medical professionals and the wider public as an illness in the perpetrator, as is indicated by the other name it is known by, Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (Adshead and Brooke 2001, xi). This is the way that it is portrayed in *Sharp Objects*, too: the nurse who treated Marian refers to it as a

"disease" (*SO*, 293) and thus implies that Adora's abusive behavior is effectively out of her own control. After Marian's death, Adora herself wrote in her diary as an explanation for her behavior that she "couldn't stop" (310), which further contributes to the image of Adora as mentally ill. Though the reliability of Adora's own account can be questioned, the narrative nonetheless strongly implies that her violence is the product of a compulsion caused by MBP and not entirely of her own free will. This results in the erasure of her agency and, to a degree, her responsibility, which is common in cases where the violent mother is labeled as mad or mentally ill. Peter (2006, 291) notes that "part of the problem with labeling mothers as mad is that it helps to reinforce commonly held stereotypes of mothers and women; for instance, that all mothers naturally love and conversely, would not harm their children. Therefore, any mother who deviates from this assumption is often made sense via mad rationalizations." This rationalization is strongly present in *Sharp Objects,* where MBP – perceived there as a mental illness – is used to explain Adora's otherwise seemingly unnatural violent behavior and, consequently, to preserve the idea of nurture as the natural, healthy state of motherhood.

3.1.2 The "Bad" Mother: Diondra

Another type of violent mother character that appears in the novels is the mother who does not hurt her own children, but rather hurts other people (or herself) in order to protect her children. This trope is particularly embodied by Diondra in *Dark Places*. She is a teenage mother who becomes pregnant at the age of seventeen during her relationship with Ben. This is an issue for her because of her strict father, who has threatened to "literally kill her" if she were to become pregnant outside of marriage, let alone as a teenager (*DP*, 247). In order to avoid this fate, she decides that her only option is to run away before the pregnancy becomes noticeable and to convince Ben, as the father, to come with her and provide for her and the baby. However, their plans are interrupted when they are at the Days' house getting Ben's things and Michelle, Ben's ten-year-old sister, known to be nosy, walks into the room and discovers that Diondra is pregnant. Michelle had already been blackmailing Ben over a sexually explicit note from Diondra that she had found; when she finds out about the baby, she immediately attempts to blackmail them further and threatens to tell their mother. Diondra – who, as was established in the previous chapter, has a violent temper, and who has also been paranoid about Michelle finding out ever since she discovered the note – does not take this well and lunges for Michelle. Michelle gets away and runs into her bedroom, where Diondra follows and after a brief struggle ends up strangling Michelle to death in order to protect her secret. Afterwards, once they have overheard the murders of Patty and Debby, Diondra tries to convince Ben that they also need

to kill Libby, seven years old at the time, to guarantee a "[c]lean break" for themselves (401) in case Libby saw or heard her commit the murder. Ben, however, only pretends to look for Libby and actually tells her to stay hidden, which allows her to survive despite Diondra's efforts to the contrary.

Diondra's act of extreme fatal violence, then, can be seen as a way of protecting her unborn child. This kind of a heightened and pathologized maternal protective instinct is a common way of portraying violent mothers both in real life and in fiction. Boyle (2005) notes that while motherhood has historically been considered natural and essential to women, "pregnancy and childbearing have [also] long been seen as sites of female power, a power that that men have attempted to erase or usurp" (118). One attempted way of erasing this perceived power has been the pathologization of women's bodies and, consequently, motherhood, so that when a woman hurts or even kills someone to protect her child, it is understood to be the result of a misguided maternal instinct or, alternately, her specifically female body, whose "natural state [is] diseased" (Boyle 2005, 119). This form of maternal violence is often not viewed as equally shocking as the violence towards one's own child, however, because it does not clash with the fundamental stereotype of mothers as nurturers and protectors of their children. As Boyle puts it, "mothers' rage is culturally acceptable when it can be used to bolster the (nuclear) family" (117). Thus, when a mother's aggression and/or violence can be interpreted as serving normative ends, namely protecting her children, it is no longer a transgression of her appropriate role as a mother. Rather, it is that stereotypical role taken to its other extreme: in Diondra's case, a mother who would do anything, even kill other children, in order to protect her own child.

Diondra is not, however, a perfect example of this kind of unfailingly selfless and protective mother. The murder of Michelle and the attempted murder of Libby can be seen both as extreme acts of self-defense as well as efforts to protect her child. Because of her father's threats, it is her own life on the line as well, not only that of her baby. Based on how her motives and mindset are described elsewhere in the narrative, it is in fact more likely that her primary motivation in killing Michelle is to protect herself. Ben repeatedly notes that Diondra does not "act pregnant" (*DP*, 246) or particularly maternal. When she grabs her belly, it is never "affectionately, protectively," only aggressively, "like it was a burden he [Ben] was too stupid to offer to carry" (382). Throughout her pregnancy, Diondra smokes, drinks alcohol and does drugs, which she knows she should not do, but according to her "only health nuts gave up all that stuff" (246). At the time of the flashbacks, she has also not gone to see a doctor about the pregnancy and seems to have no intention of doing so. It is apparent, then, that she is not overly

concerned for the wellbeing of the baby, and instead puts her own short-term pleasure and convenience above any concerns over the baby's health. Boyle points to similar portrayals of violent mothers in news media, where "the focus on the excesses of the mother's body and sexuality work to position her as a bad mother and, hence, a criminal" (2005, 118). In *Dark Places*, references to Diondra's bodily excess abound, and they are crucial in creating the image of Diondra as a stereotypical "bad" mother before her child is even born. Although teenage Diondra's fatal violence can be read as an act of semi-selfless protection, her overall behavior disproves this notion and lands her firmly among other mothers whose "unnatural," non-normative violence is rationalized by referring to the pathological maternal body.

While Diondra ultimately falls short of her supposed role as the protective mother, there is another mother character in *Dark Places* whose intentions align with the usual motherly stereotype: Patty Day, the mother of Libby, Ben, Michelle and Debby. In many ways, Patty as a mother is the opposite of Diondra, as she only wants the best for her children and is even willing to sacrifice herself to provide a better chance at life for them. She is a single mother to her four children while the children's father, Runner, is around only rarely. She runs the family farm, but due to extreme money troubles she is unable to pay for it and finds out that the farm is going under, with no way for her to pay her debts. Bankruptcy is considered particularly shameful in the community that they live in: after a man dies in an apparent gruesome accident on his farm, the townspeople are mournful at first, but after finding out that his farm was going under they begin to blame him for the accident: "*he should have been more careful*" (*DP*, 81, italics in original). Partially because of this shame, but mostly in a final effort to provide a better life for her children, Patty decides to hire a hitman, a so-called Angel of Death, to kill her so that her children can collect her life insurance and get back on their feet after the farm goes under. What is notable here is that she is never herself shown to be violent: even when she decides that she needs to die, she hires someone else to do it, despite having practically no money, rather than killing herself. Her plan goes horrifically wrong, however, because the night that she has arranged for the killing happens to be the same night that Ben and Diondra come to the house to pack up their things and end up killing Michelle. In the chaos that follows, the hitman accidentally kills not only Patty, but also nine-year-old Debby, who has woken up and wandered into the scene. Thus, though Patty never crosses the line into directly committing violence herself, her actions nonetheless end up having violent consequences, namely in the form of Debby's death. Even Patty, the most conventional and stereotype-abiding mother of Flynn's, is ultimately unable to successfully nurture her children the way that, according to societal norms, she is supposed to. In the end, she is punished for her selfless act of secondhand

violence with the death of her child in a way that Diondra, for her cold-blooded and arguably self-serving murder, is notably not.

3.1.3 Weaponized Motherhood: Amy

In *Gone Girl*, by contrast, Amy significantly stands out from the other violent mother characters found in Flynn's novels. In fact, she is not really a mother in any part of the novel and is thus not easily associated with motherhood. However, she does manage to weaponize motherhood and use it as a manipulative tool in a way that is completely unlike any of the other violent women in Flynn's novels. Before disappearing, Amy fakes a pregnancy with the unwitting help of a pregnant neighbor in order to appear as a more sympathetic victim in the eyes of the American public and to maximize the public outrage and resentment directed at Nick in the aftermath of her disappearance. In doing so, she again displays her keen awareness of the public perception of women, stating that "Americans like what is easy, and it's easy to like pregnant women – they're like ducklings or bunnies or dogs" (*GG*, 290). It must be noted that, although she manages to maneuver a pregnancy into her official medical records, she is never actually pregnant at this point.

At the end of the novel, some time after she has returned to Nick and after Nick has repeatedly threatened to leave her and publicly expose her manipulative and violent behavior, Amy tells him that she is pregnant – this time, for real. As an answer to Nick's protests that the baby cannot possibly be his, she reminds him of the time they had visited a fertility clinic and tells him that she went back to collect his sample and kept it as a back-up plan when planning her disappearance. This showcases again her exceptional ability to plan for any possible outcome, since if her original plan had succeeded, she would have killed herself and never needed the pregnancy as a failsafe. Moreover, this acts as a final demonstration of her skills as a manipulator. She is aware of Nick's desperate need to please and to always appear as the good guy, as well as to be a better father than his own had been to him. Thus, she knows what Nick also eventually realizes: that if he left her now, the public outrage against him would be immense, which is exactly what Amy is counting on. Nick also knows that he would never get custody, as Amy would simply fabricate evidence against him: "I could suddenly see the accusations – of molestation or abuse – and I would never see my baby" (459). The reveal of the pregnancy means that Nick "had been thoroughly, finally outplayed" (ibid.), forced into staying with a woman whom he describes as his "forever antagonist" (461). For Amy, then, motherhood eventually functions only as a means of manipulating people, most importantly Nick, into doing what she wants. Her violence is neither towards the child nor for the child, or

really about the child at all. Rather, motherhood appears to her as a weapon to be brandished whenever she needs to polish her own public image and manipulate people onto her side.

Amy's particular form of weaponized motherhood is arguably the most stereotype-breaking of all the mother characters in Flynn's novels. When seen as a mother, Amy does not fit comfortably into any of the roles prescribed to mothers in general or even to violent mothers specifically. She is certainly not nurturing, as she shows no actual interest in having a child. Only Diary Amy, her fabricated alter ego specifically designed to come across as a good and likeable victim, ever voices a wish for motherhood, and this is only because Amy knew this would make her "*easy* to like" (*GG*, 266, italics in original) and more likely "to appeal to cops, to appeal to the public" (267). In terms of the common rationalizations for maternal violence, Amy is the hardest of Flynn's characters to pin down. She is described by various characters as "crazy" (e.g. 261, 385) and even admits herself that she "may have gone a bit mad" in framing Nick for her murder (264), but she is never outright identified as mentally ill in the way that Adora is. Most closely, she fits into the rationalization of a "bad" mother (Peter 2006; Comack and Brickey 2007), in that her child does not appear to be of any concern to her at all, and she is only interested in her own survival and comfort. Although Diondra is fairly similar to Amy in this sense, it is noteworthy that, whereas Diondra at least claims to have the baby's best interest at heart, Amy does not even attempt to put up such a pretense. As far as the outside world is concerned, Amy is a perfectly normal expecting mother, but she never attempts to hide her true intentions from Nick, as it is at that point no longer necessary for her manipulation. As long as they are having a child together, Nick is stuck with her, even if he now knows the kind of violence that she is capable of committing. The novel ends before the baby is born, so it is impossible to say what Amy would be like as a mother once the weaponized idea of the baby becomes a real living child, but she has nevertheless already shown that she stands outside any common understandings of motherhood, violent or not.

3.2 Heritability of Violence

As perhaps one of the most famous lines in *Sharp Objects* proclaims, "A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort" (320). In *Sharp Objects*, of course, this is understood very literally as a possible explanation for Amma's propensity for violence after being poisoned by her mother for her entire childhood. However, the same idea is brought up in less literal forms in Flynn's other two novels as well. The characters in all three novels struggle with questions of how violence is passed down in families – in other words, how being brought up by violent parents and being subjected to abuse at their hands can lead the child to act out violently in turn.

In today's society, women's and girls' violence in particular is often framed as a response to their own victimization under patriarchy, either by individual men or the patriarchal society at large (Peter 2006; Comack and Brickey 2007). In Flynn's novels, the cycles of victimization and violence take place within the domestic sphere: in the family unit between generations. Specifically, the violence is passed down from woman to woman, from mother to daughter, instead of it being passed down as a result of the women being victimized by men such as fathers or husbands. While the novels do contain some examples of violence passed down from father to son, all of the physical violence moves specifically from mother to daughter. Furthermore, the violent actions of all but one of the major female characters can be explained by their own past experiences of violence as a victim, which goes to show the importance of this theme in Flynn's writing.

3.2.1 The Preaker-Crellins: A Cycle of Violence

As mentioned above, the theme of familial violence is especially prevalent in *Sharp Objects*. The most important violent women in the novel are all from one family – namely Adora and two of her daughters, Amma and Camille. As the two main violent offenders and murderers in the novel, Adora and Amma are particularly contrasted throughout as Amma's violence is presented as a consequence of the violence she suffered at Adora's hands. As Camille sees it, Amma's turn towards violence was inevitable since she was "weaned on poison" (*SO*, 320) and fed various unnecessary and harmful medications throughout her life. Beyond Camille's own assessment, the narrative as a whole supports this idea of a connection between Adora's and Amma's violence. Most significantly, the two are shown to employ similar strategies of manipulation towards other people. Miller (2019) notes that where Amma is a child often acting older than her age, Adora is a grown woman who at times acts like a little girl: "As a girl-woman who occupies an ambiguous space between appearances of innocence and expressions of knowing, Adora manipulates cultural scripts in order to regulate the bodies and behaviors of others" (496). In order to manipulate her daughters into compliance and to avoid suspicion, Adora takes on an almost childish persona every time her motives or methods are questioned. Amma, as was shown in the previous chapter, utilizes this exact same tactic, thus creating a further connection between the violence of the two characters. However, Miller emphasizes the nature of this inheritance to be "genealogical" (ibid.), rather than occurring through Amma's victimization: "Amma is figured as part of an ancestry of monstrous women, whose 'bad genes' constitute a biological destiny of evil" (495). However, both the similarities in their methods and the fact that Adora's violence was specifically directed at her own daughters indicate that

Amma's violent behavior, while ultimately originating in Adora, is learned rather than inherent, nurture rather than nature.

Of course, Camille's comment about children weaned on poison also applies in an equally literal sense to Camille herself. She suffered similar physical abuse as a child, but also emotional abuse unlike her two sisters. She also notably "considers harm a comfort" (*SO*, 320). From the age of thirteen, her preferred method for coping with everything that is going on around her has been to cut herself, which is something that Adora has not hesitated to use as a reason to mock and humiliate her. This humiliation takes its most extreme form when Adora notes the only spot of uncut, unscarred skin on Camille's body, a small circular area on her lower back, and tells her that "[s]omeday I'll carve my name there" (192), thus voicing her need to leave her mark on Camille in the form of her violent legacy. At the end of the novel, after Adora's MBP has been discovered and she has been arrested for the murders, Camille takes Amma in and moves with her back to Chicago, where she begins taking care of Amma. As she is giving Amma some aspirin for a fever, she is reminded of Adora and begins to wonder about her own behavior: "One or two pills. So easy to give. Would I want to give another, and another? Would I like taking care of a sick little girl?" (314). Although she worries about whether she has inherited something unsavory from her mother after all, she never repeats Adora's actual violence towards Amma. Instead, she decides that "[w]e're not going to do it like [Adora] does it anymore" (315), thus reassuring Amma that she only intends to help her by taking care of her, unlike Adora.

The symbolic connection between Camille and Adora is finally broken on the last page of the novel, as Camille cuts into the last spot of clear skin, which has throughout the story served as a parallel to Adora, who had on her wrist a similarly shaped "little circle of jagged lines, and within, a ring of perfect skin," the result of a bite from Ann Nash (203). By cutting up the remaining spot on her body, Camille effectively severs that connection and takes away Adora's chance to "carve [her] name there" (192). After this, she returns to the question of her motivations in caring for Amma and appears to absolve herself: "Was I good at caring for Amma because of kindness? Or did I like caring for Amma because I have Adora's sickness? […] Lately, I've been leaning toward kindness" (321). However, in performing this final act of self-mutilation, she is also simultaneously continuing the legacy of violence that was passed onto her by Adora through her abuse.

The maternal cycle of violence in *Sharp Objects* extends past these two generations. There are several references throughout the novel to Adora's childhood and victimization at the hands of her own mother, Joya. She is described by the other characters as a "[s]cary, scary

woman" (*SO*, 106) whom they "[n]ever saw […] smile at [Adora] or touch her in a loving way" (258). In the novel, this is used to partially explain Adora's cold and violent behavior towards her own children, as Adora herself tells Camille: "You remind me of my mother. Joya. […] My mother never loved me, either. And if you girls won't love me, I won't love you" (190). In addition to this general lovelessness, Adora repeatedly uses Joya's physical abuse as a defense when Camille accuses her of being cold towards her. Adora claims that she was abandoned in the woods when she was eight years old, and also that Joya used to pinch her as a child, which is something that Camille remembers Adora doing to her.

The narrative does not, however, entirely support excusing Adora's actions due to the previous violence that she may or may not have faced. Camille in particular is skeptical about whether Adora was ever actually abused, and the narrative offers reasonable support for her suspicions. Throughout the investigation into the deaths of Ann and Natalie, Adora positions herself as the victim in the situation: as Camille puts it, "[e]very tragedy that happens in the world happens to my mother" (88). Even before her MBP is revealed, Adora is also shown to excessively enjoy receiving attention, concern and even pity from others. This sets Adora's claims about Joya into question – she might be making up the abuse in order to justify her own behavior, perhaps even to herself, and to make herself more sympathetic. This being said, there are indications that Joya may also have had MBP and routinely made Adora sick. An old friend of Adora's tells Camille that as a girl she "was sick all the time" and "was always having tubes and needles and such stuck to her" (259), which is exactly what happens to Marian later. Camille feels that even if Adora was abused herself, it in no way lessens the severity of what she has gone on to do to all three of her daughters. It does, however, function as an explanation for her violence and tie her behavior into a longer line of violence as maternal inheritance.

3.2.2 The Days: Genetics of Violence

In addition to violence being passed down through intergenerational cycles of victimization and perpetration, there are also several references to violence running in the family in another way. In all three novels, the characters speculate about violent tendencies being passed down in the blood – genetically, not through abuse as such. For years, behavioral geneticists have been working to determine the role of genetics in causing violent behavior. According to Wachbroit (2001), most scholars who study human behavior agree that "(violent) behavior is the result of an interaction of a number of factors – genetic, developmental, social, economic, cultural – so that reductionist views, according to which such behavior is nothing but the operation of just one of these factors, are false" (33). In other words, there is a general consensus that several

different factors, including both environmental and biological, are involved in causing aggression and violence. However, as Wachbroit goes on to explain, the exact relationship and relative importance of these factors remains in contention. What seems clear, though, is that the role of genetics is not insignificant, even if only as "propensities that prime a person to act in a certain way given a certain environment" (Beaver et al. 2014, 132). This question of the significance of heritability also comes up repeatedly in Flynn's novels and is a major theme especially in *Dark Places*. Similar to the idea of violent behavior being a direct result of previous victimhood, this literary trope strips women of their agency by positing that they never had a choice in their behavior since they were essentially born violent or "mean" in some way.

In *Dark Places*, the first lines of the novel find Libby meditating on her own inherent cruelty: "I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ. […] It's the Day blood" (*DP*, 1). What she perceives as the bad Day family blood is visually represented throughout the novel by the family's characteristic red hair. In fact, the Days' red hair is explicitly linked to blood both in the sense of family and in the sense of violence. Libby, in an effort to escape her past and her "bad" heritage (334), bleaches her hair blonde, but the red roots (another clear play on words referring to family) keep growing out. She notes that "[i]t looked like my scalp was bleeding […] It looked gory" (6). Ben, who Libby at first believes to be guilty, shares this red-haired trait, which, in Libby's mind, further connects the genetics of hair color with the genetics of violence. During her investigation, Libby lets her roots gradually grow out, but it is only in the end, after she has begun to believe in Ben's innocence, that she dyes her hair back to its original red and thus accepts her heritage, which she now sees is less violent than she previously thought. Throughout the novel, it had been implied that the connection between red hair and violence had been mostly in Libby's head, as she and Ben inherited their hair color from the decidedly nonviolent Patty – not from Runner, their at times violent father and the origin of the Day family name. Patty's own red hair is also associated with violence, but only in her capacity as a victim, as Libby remembers seeing her dead body on the night of the murders: "Above her, long strings of red hair were stuck to the walls with blood and brain matter" (52). In this way, the idea of violence as something that can simply be inherited like a hair color is represented in a particularly concrete manner.

The red hair as a signifier of the supposed violent heritage of the Days becomes most relevant towards the end of the novel, when Libby goes to visit Diondra and her now adult daughter Crystal. As Ben has been in prison since the Day Massacre, Crystal has been brought up by Diondra on an isolated ranch away from most other human contact. During the visit, Crystal lets slip a comment that finally allows Libby to connect the dots and understand what

really happened that night: that Diondra was there at the farm and killed Michelle. Diondra and Crystal immediately realize that she knows the truth, and without hesitation, Crystal attacks Libby by hitting her with a clothes iron while Diondra pins her down. Libby manages to get away, and Crystal and Diondra proceed to go after her with a gun in a near-exact reenactment of the night of the Day Massacre. Crystal's active role in the attack makes her yet another violent woman and yet another violent child of violent parents, but as the daughter of Diondra and Ben she in fact holds a dual position compared to other such characters in Flynn's novels. Unlike the other daughters, she appears to inherit her violence through both victimization and genetics, from Diondra and Ben respectively. It is never stated that Diondra has outright abused Crystal, but she has raised her believing that it is vital for her to stay "a secret" (*DP*, 386), effectively cutting her off from all outside contact. Libby notes that Crystal appears "frightened" (387) when Libby suggests that it may no longer be necessary for her to stay so completely hidden. This fear is attributed to Diondra's manipulation. Another factor that speaks to Diondra's total control over her adult daughter is Crystal's otherwise unexplained willingness to hurt Libby, whom she has previously spent her life idolizing. However, Libby also explicitly identifies Crystal as "the Day Girl" (379), a continuation of the Day family line. She notes how much Crystal looks like a Day, with the red hair and a face that is "pure us, me, Ben, my mom" (385), the only difference being that she is tall like Diondra. This makes Libby wonder whether Crystal has inherited something else from Ben – namely, the supposed family tendency for violence. However, as Ben is soon shown to be innocent and not the killer Libby thought he was, this seems to ultimately implicate Diondra. Crystal's mere existence is specifically framed as the result of Diondra's lack of appropriate control over her sexuality. Furthermore, Crystal's violence, despite her uncanny outward resemblance to Ben, is implicitly identified as Diondra's fault for not only failing to discipline Crystal's behavior but in fact manipulating and encouraging her to behave violently.

3.2.3 Exceptions to the Rule

While the different cycles and inheritances of violence are prominent themes in Flynn's first two novels, *Gone Girl* and specifically Amy are once again something of an exception: Amy's violence is entirely her own, not inherited from her parents. Even as a child, she was never a victim of parental violence in the way that most of the characters discussed above were – she was not "weaned on poison," as it were. Her parents were also not shown to be violent people in general, which means that Amy did not inherit her violence through genetics any more than she did through victimization. That being said, it should be noted that her violence does at least

partially stem from her feelings towards her parents, who were, if not outright violent, rather dismissive and even neglectful of Amy and her feelings both growing up and later as an adult. Amy's relationship with her parents is steeped in thinly veiled resentment, mostly due to the popular children's picture book series called *Amazing Amy* that Amy's parents have been publishing for decades. These books star a fictionalized version of Amy, the Amazing Amy, whose life is based on the real Amy – only where the real Amy fails, her parents make Amazing Amy succeed. Throughout her whole life, Amy has felt upstaged by her parents' literary creation, which has bred resentment towards not only the *Amazing Amy* series but also her parents, for whom she never felt good enough. In addition to the fictional Amazing Amy, the real Amy has also had to live in the shadow of her dead sisters. Her mother had seven miscarriages and stillbirths before Amy, all girls, and even as an adult Amy sees them as her competition: the "seven dead dancing princesses" who "get to be perfect without even trying" (*GG*, 250). It is unclear whether Amy's violent persecution complex is something inherent or whether it was brought on by perceived wrongs, chief among which was Amazing Amy and the unattainably perfect sisters. Amy herself blames her parents: "they made me this way and then deserted me" (267). This is not a particularly reliable assessment, however, as Amy has a habit of blaming her own actions on other people and thus skirting responsibility. Certainly, it seems unlikely that her parents' apparent disappointment could be the sole origin of violence as severe as Amy's is, but on the other hand the origins are in her case significantly less clear than for most of the other female characters discussed in this thesis. In both *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places*, the narratives offer some kinds of explanations for the violence of the main characters, even if those explanations can be questioned; in *Gone Girl*, no such explanation is ever offered. Amy stands alone in her violence to the end.

While Amy resides conspicuously outside the dynamics of familial cycles of violence, it is nevertheless a theme that is brought up in *Gone Girl* on a smaller scale, between Nick and his father. As this is a passing down of violence between two men, it serves as a useful point of comparison with the numerous mother-daughter relationships discussed in this section. Nick, unlike Amy, comes from a family with some history of violence throughout his childhood. His father in particular was always notoriously misogynistic. At the time of Amy's disappearance, his father suffers from Alzheimer's, which for him manifests in part as repeated chains of cursing and misogynistic slurs directed at any women present. Nick is embarrassed by his father's tirades whenever he witnesses them and is determined not to become like his father. On several occasions, he reflects on his own behavior around women and is often able to recognize and push down any negative feelings that begin to rise up in him whenever he is in a

situation which puts him at odds with a woman. He admits that "[n]o matter how hard I try to be my mother's son, my dad's voice comes into my head unbidden, depositing awful thoughts, nasty words" (*GG*, 65). In his narration, he lets out similar slurs as his father, directed mostly at Amy but also at other "angry women" (55). Unlike his father, however, Nick never says these out loud, and he also does not act on the violent fantasies that result from his rages, such as his repeated appeal for Amy to "*[c]ome home so I can kill you*" (335, 401; italics in original). He explicitly identifies these aggressive feelings and impulses as originating in his upbringing around his father, and crucially, he is mostly able to overcome them.

There is another, similar instance of a potential but ultimately broken cycle of violence between father and son in *Dark Places*, between the characters Runner and Ben. Runner is an absent and emotionally distant father, who has not been living on the farm with the rest of the family since the divorce five years before the murders. He is described as "crazy, drunk, and violent in an unimpressive way – a small man with sneaky fists" (*DP*, 29), as well as a chronically broke gambler who paid no child support and in fact occasionally begged both Patty (before the murders) and Libby and Ben (years after) for money. The summer before the murders, after Runner had been crashing on Patty's couch for months and providing little to no help around the farm, Patty asked him to leave, to which he replied by calling her a bitch, throwing a glass at her and stealing money and alcohol from her. On the day of the murders, he comes around again asking for money, and when Patty rejects him, he slams and kicks the front door so hard it cracks the wall. No one in the novel has many positive things to say about Runner, but Ben in particular resents him – he "could tell that Runner thought [Ben] was a pussy" (57), and he in turn considers Runner "a bully" (252). Especially since finding out about Diondra's pregnancy – since finding out that he is going to be a father – Ben has decided that he does not want to be like Runner, neither as a father nor as a man. Like Nick, Ben can recognize where Runner's influence is rising up in him, and others can see it too; Patty at one point worries about Ben's "taste for hurt" when roughhousing with his sisters because "[s]he could see him getting that same look Runner got when he was around the kids – jacked up and tense" (281). However, because Ben is so self-aware about it, he is able to suppress it and do better, at least in his own view. He consistently treats Diondra well, no matter how she treats him in return, and he is determined to do nearly anything to provide for their baby the way that Runner never did for Ben and his sisters. Unlike Diondra, however, his protective instinct never leads him all the way to violence – he is not prepared to hurt his sisters even when they appear to threaten him, Diondra and the baby. In general, much like Nick, Ben spends a lot of time reflecting on the influence that his father's aggressive behavior has had on him but never ends

up repeating it in any form. This is where Nick and Ben become significant as points of comparison with the women and girls in the novels. Whereas the sons never replicate the violence of their parents, the daughters invariably do.

Flynn's repeated depiction of cycles of violence betrays her reliance on the "victim" narrative as an explanation for violent behavior, but her decision to portray these cycles as something that occurs specifically between women works to subvert this stereotype. As stated, the "victim" discourse is rooted specifically in discussions of male-perpetrated violence and its effects on women. With the exception of Diondra, all of Flynn's characters who have faced previous abuse have been victimized solely by other women, most often their mothers, which leaves them in a curious position that is not often discussed in the circles that uphold the "victim" narrative. As Peter (2006) points out, maternal abuse is seen as particularly shocking and upsetting and is often minimized in societal conversations because there is "no socially acknowledged place to put this behavior" (284) – no easy way to categorize or rationalize it. It is also an inadequate explanation for female violence, as an all-female cycle of violence only creates an infinite loop: if a woman is violent because she was abused by her mother, then why was her mother violent? There are no comfortable solutions to this, which is also apparent in Flynn's novels. For her characters, violence is heritable, but it has no identifiable male origin; it is women's own heritage through and through. Whether this constitutes a feminist statement on Flynn's part has been a point of some contention among critics (Burkeman 2013), but the fact remains that Flynn's portrayal of both cycles of violence and violence in general as something fundamental to (these) women unsettles common understandings of women and violence and, if nothing else, raises important questions. In this way, the novels have already done what Flynn intended them to do – regardless of whether one is inclined to categorize them as "feminist" as such.

4. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that Gillian Flynn utilizes various prominent stereotypes about women and violence in all of her three novels. Namely, her female characters routinely break societal expectations of female passivity and nurture, most notably by acting out aggressively and even violently towards themselves and others. This fundamental female stereotype that nearly all of Flynn's female characters violate, however, is only the first layer of expectations imposed upon women. Using feminist criminological work, I have argued that women who commit violent acts are further divided into reductive categories, both in the justice system and in the media, in order to explain female violence, which is typically seen as unnatural. Specifically, I focused on the three most commonly identified discourses that are used to rationalize women's violence: that violent women are either mad, bad or victims. Flynn's female characters, as I have shown, both reinforce and subvert these stereotypes, Amy in *Gone Girl* being arguably the most subversive of all in terms of her motives.

In Chapter 2, I focused on the teenage girl characters in Flynn's novels and analyzed their violent behavior as it relates to stereotypes about girls' violence in general. I used Ringrose's (2006) concept of the "new normal" of the mean teen girl, which originates in essentialist and pathologizing discourses of female criminality, and pointed out that since each of the novels was written and takes place during or after the time that Ringrose identifies as the rise of this norm, the characters in them can all feasibly be seen to display an awareness of it. In fact, I argued that the main three teenage girls – Amma, Diondra and Amy – are all able to manipulate their own external image to match up with this norm and thus hide their real, nonnormative physical and psychological violence. In the second section of this chapter, I showed how sexuality and violence are strongly interconnected for Flynn's violent girls. While Diondra is the only one of the girls to commit outright sexual violence, all of the girls' sexualities take on violent undertones, while their violence frequently takes on sexual undertones. This manifests itself differently for each character, but the fact of the connection between sexuality and violence remains. This, in turn, is characteristic of the "bad" discourse, where violence and sexual excess are both indicators of deviance and inappropriate womanhood. As the characters I discussed here are all underage, I also connected my analysis to the postfeminist moral panic over the sexualization of young girls, which is strikingly similar to the moral panic regarding the rise in girls' violence some decades earlier. Based on this, I concluded that Flynn's depictions of teen girls' violence and sexuality end up reinforcing existing stereotypes more than breaking them.

In Chapter 3, then, I turned my focus to mothers and daughters and the ways that violence is passed down from one to the other in Flynn's novels. In the first section of the chapter, I focused on violent mothers. I argued that the portrayals of the mother characters' violence differ from each other in two ways: the target of the violence and the way that it is explained. Adora's violence, for example, is directed at her own daughters, and it is largely explained using the "mad" discourse, as she is diagnosed with Munchausen by Proxy. Diondra, on the other hand, primarily harms people other than her child, including her partner and other people's children, and her behavior is mostly seen through the "bad" label. In the second part of the chapter, then, I analyzed the different ways that violence is inherited in families, namely from mothers to daughters. In the Preaker-Crellin family in *Sharp Objects*, there are three generations of violent women, each of which is shown to routinely abuse the next generation and thus pass on their capability for violence. This is indicative of the "victim" discourse, where women's violence is seen to be a result of their own previous victimization. In the Day family in *Dark Places*, however, violent tendencies are presented as genetically inherited without any instances of parental abuse. In the Elliot family in *Gone Girl*, violence is not a familial trait at all; rather, Amy is the only violent member of her family, male or female. Both of the novels that portray violence as heritable do, however, subvert the stereotypical victim narrative by moving it from the commonly theorized framework of patriarchal, male-perpetrated violence to a context where all violence passes down from woman to woman – from mother to daughter.

What I have aimed to do in this thesis is extend the theoretical framework of "mad", "bad" and "victim" rationalizations from the context of feminist criminology and real-world violence to the fictional domain. I feel that analyses such as mine are important to conduct because the way that violence is portrayed in the media we consume (including fiction) affects the way that we conceptualize real-world violence and its perpetrators (Bacon 2015). The critical discussion on the representation of women's violence in fiction has tended to focus mostly on films and warrior-type heroines, and only recently has begun to include other types of violent female characters. With this thesis, I have contributed to that discussion by analyzing all three of Gillian Flynn's novels. Her novels have been very influential within the genres of thriller and noir in terms of their portrayals of violent women, but, with the exception of *Gone Girl*, they have been studied very little. Thus, the inclusion and comparison of all three novels in this thesis has also aimed to present one way of analyzing Flynn's literary work as a whole. I also add to the discussion of Flynn's novels the critical analysis of the "mad," "bad" and "victim" narratives, which have often been taken for granted or even reinforced in previous studies of the novels.

One further area of study that is suggested by my thesis is a more intersectional analysis of the ways that violence is represented in the novels. I have aimed to include considerations of race and class where they are immediately relevant, but, of course, they also play much more fundamental roles in common conceptualizations of both violence and gender, which I was not able to adequately address given the scope of this thesis. It would also be worthwhile to more extensively compare Flynn's portrayals of male characters with the female characters. I only did this briefly in my discussion of the heritability of violence, as I found the comparison to highlight the significance of the passing down of violence between female characters. Focusing explicitly on the male characters does, however, hold its own interest for the study of fictional representations of violence, since violence is often seen as something that is natural for men, sometimes even required, and many of Flynn's boys and men challenge that notion and even actively work to build nonviolent masculinity. In analyzing this, intersectionality should also be considered, especially as the only major character of color in Flynn's novels (Trey in *Dark Places*) is also one of the most traditionally masculine and violent male characters in the novels.

As this thesis shows, Flynn's novels contain a wealth of different portrayals of gendered violence. Published at a time when perceptions of women's violence are shifting, the novels were born out of the cultural conversations and concerns over women's and girl's violent offending in the past few decades, but, crucially, they also contribute to them. By popularizing depictions of violent women as complex human beings, rather than formulaic femme fatales, heroines or villainesses, Flynn renders these tropes visible to wider audiences and thus invites their questioning. She also creates a nuanced frame of reference for discussing real-world crime and violence, removed from the harsh judgements often placed automatically on actual criminalized women. While her individual characters do at times echo stereotypical conceptions of female violence, her literary body of work as a whole shows a gradual progression towards increasingly subversive characterizations and, as such, more nuanced understandings of violence as a gendered phenomenon. With this in mind, and Flynn's career as a writer not yet over, one can only guess at whether she will continue exploring these themes in even more detail in her future works. As for her existing novels, though, it is clear that her stated commitment to portraying female violence in all its complexities holds. The sheer amount of variety in her violent female characters makes up for occasional lapses into simplified stereotypes. Through her work, she demonstrates that there is a place for brutal women in literature, too.

Bibliography

Adshead, Gwen and Deborah Brooke, eds. 2001. *Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy: Current Issues in Assessment, Treatment and Research*. London: Imperial College Press.

Bacon, Henry. 2015. *The Fascination of Film Violence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beaver, Kevin M., Joseph L. Nedelec, Joseph A. Schwartz and Eric J. Connolly. 2014. "Evolutionary Behavioral Genetics of Violent Crime." In *The Evolution of Violence*, edited by Todd K. Shackelford and Ranald D. Hansen, pp. 117-35. New York: Springer.

Berns, Nancy. 2001. "Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame: Political Discourse on Women and Violence." *Gender and Society*, vol. 15, no. 2: pp. 262-81.

Boyle, Karen. 2005. *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates*. London: Sage.

Burke, Eva. 2018. "From Cool Girl to Dead Girl: *Gone Girl* and the Allure of Female Victimhood." In *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, edited by Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton, pp. 71-86. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Burkeman, Oliver. 2013. "Gillian Flynn on Her Bestseller *Gone Girl* and Accusations of Misogyny." *The Guardian*, May 1, 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-bestseller-gone-girl-misogyny

Byerly, Carolyn M. and Karen Ross. 2006. *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Comack, Elizabeth and Salena Brickey. 2007. "Constituting the Violence of Criminalized Women." *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, vol. 49, no. 1: pp. 1–36.

Di Ciolla, Nicoletta and Anna Pasolini. 2018. "The Violent Mother in Fact and Fiction." In *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, edited by Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton, pp. 137-58. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Feldman, Marc D. 2013. *Playing Sick?: Untangling the Web of Munchausen Syndrome, Munchausen by Proxy, Malingering, and Factitious Disorder*. New York and London: Routledge.

Flynn, Gillian. 2007. *Sharp Objects*. London: Phoenix.

Flynn, Gillian. 2010. *Dark Places*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Flynn, Gillian. 2013. *Gone Girl*. London: Phoenix.

Flynn, Gillian. 2015. “I Was Not a Nice Little Girl…” *Powell’s Books*, July 17, 2015. https://medium.com/@Powells/i-was-not-a-nice-little-girl-c2df01e0ae1

Heidensohn, Frances. 1996. *Women and Crime*. 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Irwin, Katherine and Meda Chesney-Lind. 2008. “Girls’ Violence: Beyond Dangerous Masculinity.” *Sociology Compass*, vol. 2, no. 3: pp. 837-55.

Krug, Etienne G., Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano, eds. 2002. *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

Lloyd, Anne. 1995. *Doubly Deviant, Doubly Damned: Society’s Treatment of Dangerous Women*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Meloy, Michelle L. and Susan L. Miller. 2009. “Words That Wound: Print Media’s Presentation of Gendered Violence.” In *Women, Violence, and the Media: Readings in Feminist Criminology*, edited by Drew Humphries, pp. 34-53. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Miller, Alyson. 2019. “’Emissaries of Death and Destruction’: Reading the Child-as-Killer in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Sharp Objects*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 60, no. 4: pp. 487-500.

Morrissey, Belinda. 2003. *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge.

Naylor, Bronwyn. 2001. “Reporting Violence in the British Print Media: Gendered Stories.” *The Howard Journal*, vol. 40, no. 2: pp. 180–94.

O’Neill, Maggie and Lizzie Seal. 2012. *Transgressive Imaginations: Crime, Deviance and Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Peter, Tracey. 2006. “Mad, Bad, or Victim? Making Sense of Mother–Daughter Sexual Abuse.” *Feminist Criminology*, vol. 1, no. 4: pp. 283–302.

Redhead, Leigh. 2018. “Teenage Kicks: Performance and Postfeminism in Domestic Noir.” In *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, edited by Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton, pp. 115-35. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Renold, Emma and Jessica Ringrose. 2011. “Schizoid Subjectivities? Re-theorizing Teen Girls’ Sexual Cultures in an Era of ‘Sexualization.’” *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 47, no. 4: pp. 389-409.

Ringrose, Jessica. 2006. “A New Universal Mean Girl: Examining the Discursive Construction and Social Regulation of a New Feminine Pathology.” *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 16, no. 4: pp. 405-24.

Ringrose, Jessica. 2013. *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*. New York: Routledge.

Seal, Lizzie. 2010. *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sutton, Henry. 2018. “Gone Genre: How the Academy Came Running and Discovered Nothing Was As It Seemed.” In *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, edited by Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton, pp. 53-69. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wachbroit, Robert. 2001. “Understanding the Genetics-of-Violence Controversy.” In *Genetics and Criminal Behavior*, edited by David Wasserman and Robert Wachbroit, pp. 25-46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilczynski, Ania. 1991. “Images of Women Who Kill Their Infants: The Mad and the Bad.” *Women & Criminal Justice*, vol. 2, no. 2: pp. 71-88.

Wilczynski, Ania. 1997. “Mad or Bad? Child-Killers, Gender and the Courts.” *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 37, no. 3: pp. 419-36.

Worrall, Anne. 1990. *Offending Women: Female Lawbreakers and the Criminal Justice System*. London: Routledge.